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AUTHOR Howell, Charles
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ABSTRACT

Case study rhetoric, or the rhetoric of real experience, is concerned with the ways by which case studies appeal to their own intrinsic realness or authenticity. On the surface, case studies are often accepted fully as representing real experience. But the design, arrangement, and emphases of case studies are rhetorically constructed by the writer in order to present a sense of realness. Successful case studies tend to utilize three features which tend to make them more lifelike: surprise, embarrassment, and social difference. A case study without any surprise seems pretty unreal, yet the inclusion of surprise in a written piece always points toward artistry and arrangement. The contrivance of the order of events, for example, makes the story less real to historical experience, but makes the case study seem more real. Embarrassment between teacher and student is also a staple of teaching, and reinforces the realness of a case study by giving a sense of the inexplicable. The issue of embarrassment can be complicated by differences in social background between teacher and student, the third feature. However, by writing about subjects very different from themselves, writers are in fact reflecting their points of view. The true subject of a case study, in fact, is not the student but the teacher, whose act of understanding has been rhetorically reconstructed. Thus, case studies are valuable because they faithfully represent how teachers make sense of the experience of teaching. (HB)

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Charles Howell
The Writing Program
Syracuse University
Syracuse, New York 13244

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Charles Howell
The Writing Program
Syracuse University
Syracuse, New York 13244

The Rhetoric of Real Experience:
Case Studies and the Representation of the Human Subject

My interest in case study rhetoric, what I call the rhetoric of "real experience," grew out of discussions among teachers in the Syracuse University Writing Program. Three of us were working on case studies of students we'd taught, so we decided to form a group to write and read and discuss case studies. Although we discussed mainly studies written by colleagues at Syracuse, the ideas that came out of the group have broader relevance: I see similar features in Perl and Wilson's case studies of public school writing teachers, and Rose's Lives on the Boundary. I can also see connections to June Birnbaum and Janet Emig's chapter in Methods of Research on English Language Arts Teaching, where they survey the recent growth of case studies. I want to touch briefly on Birnbaum and Emig's piece to help place my rhetorical concerns in a broader context. They define case study in part as an investigation of "a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." They describe this form of inquiry as naturalistic rather than

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positivistic. Case studies offer "vicarious experience" by presenting "holistic and lifelike description, like those readers normally encounter in their experience of the world." Naturalistic inquiry, real-life context, vicarious experience, and lifelike description all speak to the sense of realness which is the basic rhetorical appeal I want to examine today.

In our discussion group, we never talked about the rhetoric of real experience--for us, case studies were real experience; their rhetoric was invisible. The questions we asked about these studies showed how closely we identified with them: Was the story of the case study truthfully and thoroughly told, or was there something left out which would have altered its meaning? Had the teachers in the case study done what we would have done? Were the students described in it truly representative--were they a fair sample of the students we had to deal with, and did they behave credibly, according to our own experience?

The very fact we asked such questions shows we accepted the "realness" of case studies. You could see this even more directly when we read studies that were less rhetorically adept, perhaps in draft form. We couldn't ask the same questions. The raw material would all be there--the teacher's teaching and the student's writing--but we couldn't identify the text with our own experience in the same way. Clearly there was more at issue here than subject matter drawn from experience. What we missed was design, arrangement, emphasis--a sense of realness that was rhetorically constructed. In the group we never explicitly

analyzed that sense of realness, but we did notice some features that made successful case studies more lifelike, and I want to touch on three of these today--surprise, embarrassment, and social difference--and try to explain how they made case studies more compelling, and also how they bore on ethical questions of teachers' responsibility to students as research subjects--questions which rightly trouble some readers of case studies, and go to the heart of the validity of case study as research method.

On the face of it, surprise is probably least surprising of these three features. After all, it's built into teaching, especially in writing classrooms. A case study that didn't surprise would seem pretty unreal--and yet, surprise in some ways leads away from "reality"--toward artistry, arrangement. I can show this, I think, with a very small example from my own writing. When I did a case study of a female student in mechanical engineering, whom I asked to write about the role of language in her professional training, I kept asking her in different ways about issues of gender in the classroom, and she kept not answering, until one day, when I asked the question again on her paper, she wrote in reply, "No, no, no" with several exclamation points, and added that everyone she knew kept asking her this and that she was sick to death of the subject.

This didn't come as a complete surprise to me. I'd already realized she wasn't enthralled by gender issues; I'd kept pressing partly because I genuinely thought they were relevant, and partly because I knew many of my colleagues would have

pressed this subject more vigorously than I did, and I wanted to argue that there was a point at which, as teachers, we have a duty not to press further. When I wrote the case study, I rearranged the order of events by recording the student's remarks first, and only then revealing my concern about teachers' persistence. This arrangement, as you can imagine, introduced a kind of rhetorical about-face, an element of surprise that wouldn't have been there if I had stuck strictly to chronological experience. Some readers might consider this unfair--a kind of ambush--but when you think about it rearrangements like this are inescapable in a case study. By preserving the original chronology, I would have deemphasized what was for me a very telling confrontation; in doing so, I would also have sacrificed that lifelike sense that Birnbaum and Emig allude to. Events in the order I originally experienced them would make for a narrative that was dull and featureless and hard to read, and would have none of the sense of fidelity to teachers' lived world that I hoped to achieve. My narrative, therefore, was a reconstruction of experience as a series of surprises, whose goal was not to emulate real life but rather to give it a shape that would engage and astonish readers.

This business of arrangement--contrivance--may seem to undermine the status of case study as "real" experience, because it scrambles time, making the story less real so that it will <u>seem more</u> real. This doesn't have to be as consciously manipulative as my example--it can be as innocent as

interpolating background knowledge in the narrative, or collapsing a series of conversations held over the span of weeks into a single paragraph. Of course, we as readers accept this because we know the case study isn't a log or diary: it doesn't have to proceed day by day or hour by hour because it's retrospective. The experience we want it to keep faith with isn't the act of teaching, but rather the act of remembering and figuring out. The "real experience" of the case study is mental experience; its surprises are really remembered ironies, which provide a conceptual structure to the story, and its drama is the drama of figuring out what the memories mean. Notice, by the way, how mangled the experience of the student is in this process. However carefully a writer tries to represent a student, he or she is increasingly a creature of the writer's contrivance. The more <u>real</u> the story seems to us, the less it preserves the inchoate quality of the original experience of teaching, which is our closest access to the worlds of students.

This mangling of students' experience leads to the second rhetorical element we noticed in case studies we read in our group: embarrassment between teacher and student. Embarrassment, like surprise, is a fixture of teaching, at least of my teaching, and for that reason alone a case study that left it out would seem remarkably unlifelike. Students' world and way of looking at things are often so different from teachers' that the confrontation of the two--the sudden seeing of ourselves through others' eyes--is likely to be jarring. The chance to

recreate that experience, I suspect, is a gift few case study writers would pass up. Emotional intensity, though, isn't the only issue here. Teachers and students' embarrassment also reinforces readers' sense of realness by opening up a world that is inexplicable and unpredictable, and defies our reconstructive powers. This sense of the inexplicable, of the limits of an author's ability to reconstruct, can set up an epistemological framework for an entire study, as we see in a passage from a case study written by Patricia Lambert Stock, who was a member of our group--a study included in her forthcoming book The Dialogic Curriculum: A Case Study of Teaching and Learning. In the following passage, slightly abridged, Stock describes her first encounter with Wendy, the case-study subject:

> [While] I was leading a class discussion, Wendy glossed my comments with her own mumbled commentary. Whenever I asked her to share her comments with the entire class, she refused. Wishing to nip what I perceived to be a disruptive habit in the bud, I suggested that Wendy either share her comments with everyone . . . or keep them entirely to herself. She slumped far down in her seat. . . , lowered her head onto her arms, closed her eyes, and bowed out of the class session. . . .
>
> As Wendy was leaving class, I stopped her to say that I was sorry I had embarrassed her and to ask if she realized that she had embarrassed me. Never meeting my eyes, she mumbled her irritation with me and left the room.

Later, Stock reports, she writes to Wendy

> to apologize again for embarrassing her, suggesting that my own shy, uncertain feelings. . . , my fear of falling on my face in my new teaching situation may have caused me to be insensitive and unfair. I was really sorry. Would Wendy please excuse me? Wendy responded with a letter: She understood why I had "picked on her"; she guessed she had been giving me a hard time. I shouldn't worry so much. It was nothing.

To Stock, the teacher, this was a long way from "nothing": it signaled a new start with Wendy. What I want to point out here, though, is not the importance of the confrontation for Stock's subsequent teaching, but rather the way it dramatizes the subjectivity of Stock as teacher and coauthor and establishes Wendy as a person in her own right whom the researcher can never fully know or account for. From that point forward, a kind of caution is established in the way Stock as author represents Wendy, in the way she ascribes feelings and reactions to her and interprets her writing. This brief but intense moment of embarrassment, then, opens up two new areas of uncertainty, and thus sets up a dramatic tension that arguably lies at the heart, not only of this particular case study, but more generally of the experience of teaching. From now on, Wendy will, like many of our students, seem slightly mysterious, potentially threatening, and whatever knowledge we gain about her in the course of the study will be as tentative and hard won as knowledge of students in our classrooms. The description of Wendy's resistance, in effect, keeps the case study honest, dramatizing the limits of the researcher's knowledge, and validating Wendy's status as an independent agent rather than simply an object of our professional scrutiny. Depicting the embarrassment, therefore, is a smart move, ethically as well as rhetorically, and you can see that it functions the same way in Mike Rose's account of embarrassing early encounters with some of the adult students he taught in the Teacher Corps, and also in the uneasiness that

arose between Perl and Wilson and the writing teachers they studied.

This issue of embarrassment, in the case studies we read in our group, was complicated by differences in social background between teachers and students, and these differences are the third rhetorical feature I want to explore today as part of the appeal to "real experience." Syracuse case study-writers often chose subjects who differed from themselves in race, gender, social class, career goals, and level of academic preparation--often three or four of these at once. Why was this, I wondered? "I'm not here to clone myself," said one author, when I asked about it. And yet, when you look closely, you can see a self-referential thread in our interest in students from different backgrounds. Their unusualness, after all, reflects our point of view, our unstated norms. When we write about them in case studies, we describe our discovery process, invoking hypothetical readers who share our norms; in effect, we argue for a reality that transcends preconceptions and is therefore more powerful than daily experience.

How this rhetorical mechanism works--the self-referentiality of teachers' concern with social difference, and how case studies based on it challenge and help reconstitute our sense of realness--can be seen in another study of Patti Stock's, this one entitled "The Politics of Literacy," coauthored with Jay Robinson and published by Heineman in Conversations on the Written Word, which Robinson edited. In this study, Stock's student Sanchez,

the son of migrant workers, writes a short story in which he envisions himself imprisoned--a story which begins with him grasping the bars of his cell, looking out "into the bitter morning" on the last day of a thirty-five year sentence for a murder committed at approximately the age he is now as a student in Stock's class.

In her comment, Stock shows how she read the story in such a way as to construct, in her imagination, the world of Sanchez' experience, which is so different from her own.

> As Sanchez imagined the future, in the form of an action-filled fiction [Stock writes], he did so in shapes that are in fact the shapes of his present, of the life he lives with the "brothers," of the lives lived by his friends and their families. Violence, murder, are realities in Sanchez's worlds, not just in the world of his imagination, a world that has, no doubt, been exposed to X-rated films as well as hour-long gangster programs . . . on weekday night television. At least two of the twenty-seven students in Sanchez's class had known murder in their families. It is perhaps not surprising that, having come close to it, fearing it, Sanchez chose to reflect on it by creating a fictional character who watches his friends being murdered, who murders others, who lives with the consequences of murder, and who wonders what it all means to him and to his family.

Notice the strength of Stock's identification with Sanchez as she rehearses what it must feel like to live in his world: in effect, she must transpose herself into that world, to see it from his point of view. Even in the midst of this transposition, however, she remains unequivocally herself: the periodic sentence that ends with "what it all means to him and to his family" testifies to an education very unlike what Sanchez has received. In effect, this is an act of ventriloquism whose

resonance depends on the social distance over which Stock's voice is projected. Its realness, for the authors and for readers who will probably identify with teacher rather than student, is counter-intuitive--it shows the shocking ordinariness in someone else's life of what to us is profoundly unfamiliar. It challenges our customary expectations; it argues for a rethinking of our sense of realness. In effect, it is another version of surprise, and also of embarrassment. The three features of rhetorical realness, though different on their face, disturb us in similar ways, disrupting our settled consciousness and forcing on us the arduous enterprise of reconstruction.

The act of ventriloquism--the self-referential quality of the way we explore social difference--brings us back to more basic questions: what, if anything, do case studies prove, and what can you learn from reading them? As I've tried to show today, these questions are closely tied to the issue of realness, fidelity to readers' experience. Whether you're persuaded by a case study and what you can learn from it--how far, if at all, you can generalize from its conclusions--depends on whether you discover in it a slice of life that you consider representative. Here, though, we run into a contradiction: none of the subjects of case studies I've described here was presented as typical. The drama of Sanchez lay in his untypicality--his remoteness from Stock's familiar world. Birnbaum and Emig support this point when they characterize societies that value case studies as honoring "uniqueness." How, then, can anyone generalize from our case studies, if we continually choose subjects who are unusual

in some way, who pose special difficulties that are worth noticing precisely because we haven't encountered them before?

I suspect the answer to this question lies in rethinking who is the subject of the case study, and what is the feature of it that is generalizable. We customarily identify the subject of a case study as the student--and yet, for reasons related both to rhetoric and to ethics, the student is and must be mysterious and basically unknowable. The true subject of a case study, I suggest, is the teacher, and the thing that is generalizable is the teacher's interpretive method. What is rhetorically constructed, endowed with the realness of shared experience, is not the student or the lesson or the classroom, but the teacher's act of understanding, the struggle to make sense of what is ultimately inexplicable.

This issue of <u>real</u> experience in case studies is not, then, just a question of persuasive tactics, but also bears on more basic questions of ethics and validity. Case studies must surprise and engage readers because they are a representation, not of the experience of teaching <u>per se</u>, but of the mental experience of trying to make sense of teaching; they must invoke embarrassment because that is the precondition of any real knowledge of our students, who are mysterious to themselves as well as to us; and they must refer in some way to social difference, arguing for an extended reality. These three elements, I suggest, will be discernible in all teacher-written case studies that deal with student writers at or near college age, and with minor modifications in other kinds of case studies

as well, as I've tried to suggest in referring to Perl and Wilson, and to Rose. The effects, in many cases, will be subtler than the examples I've offered here--surprises muted, embarrassment fleeting, social differences less obvious--but they will nonetheless contribute to the feeling of realness and lifelike description, and help assure us that what Birnbaum and Emig call the vicarious experience of a case study is something we can learn from, because it faithfully represents how we ourselves try to make sense of the experience of teaching.